

NIEK  
KEMPS

THE CORCORAN  
GALLERY OF ART







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## INTRODUCTION

TERRIE SULTAN, *Curator of Contemporary Art*

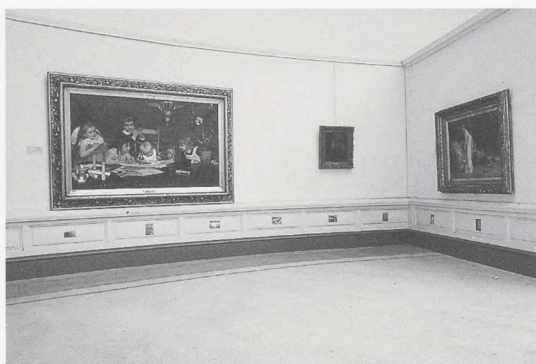
I first became acquainted with Niek Kemps' art through the 1986 exhibition "A Distanced View."<sup>1</sup> His sculpture was mysterious and elusive; a hybrid of pure geometry in form and abstract philosophy in content. The scale was commanding, almost intimidating; on the other hand, the choice of materials—lacquered surfaces, laminated glass, decorative flowered wallpaper, steel—was so seductively contradictory, and so often emphasized delicacy and transparency, that I was compelled to try and comprehend the work in material terms alone.

More than a year ago we met to discuss an exhibition for the Corcoran. Kemps' previous solo exhibitions have been precise and exacting; while he is highly conscious of the spatial aspects of any environment in which he shows his work, the available spaces have generally been of the contemporary standard: clean, white boxes. Based on his interest in artistic contextualization as a "reflexive position on the part of the artist with regard to the world around him,"<sup>2</sup> and fascinated by his ongoing obsession with how content is altered by context, we resolved that he show his work not only within the context of the Gallery's beaux-arts architecture, but also in juxtaposition with works from the collection.

<sup>1</sup> "A Distanced View: One Aspect of Recent Art from Belgium, France, Germany, and Holland," organized by Lynn Gumpert for the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1989.

<sup>2</sup> Saskia Bos, "From a Close Distance," in NIEK KEMPS: TWEE TWO DEUX, exh.cat. Rotterdam: Museum Boymans-van Beuningen; Saint-Etienne: Musée d'Art Moderne, 1988, 31.





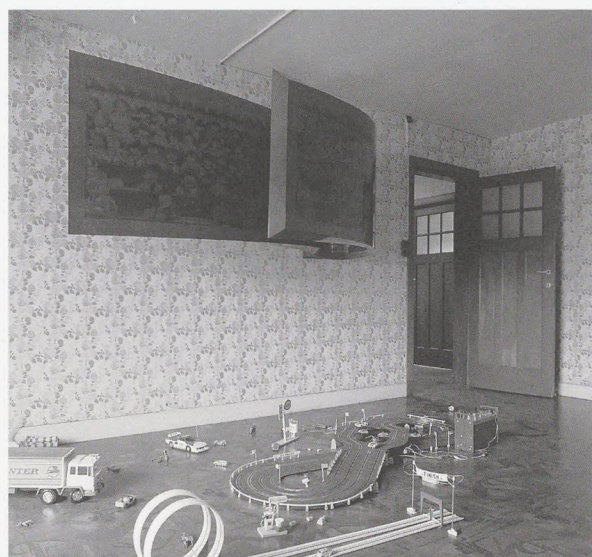
Other collaborative projects have allowed Kamps to explore the conventions of how art is displayed and viewed, and how institution, artist, and viewer share in conferring value and creating meaning. For an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Gent, Belgium, he showed *CATHARSIS* (1984) a series of postcard images and accompanying texts, which were exhibited interspersed with the work of other artists. A modern-day incarnation of the sixteenth-century Dutch emblemata,<sup>3</sup> *CATHARSIS* allowed Kamps to fashion a slightly diabolical intervention wherein his work existed simultaneously in time and space with the work of both historical and contemporary artists. In 1986, during the exhibition "Chambres d'Amis" that took place in private homes throughout the city of Gent, Kamps chose the central stairway of his site to work within what he described as "an open labyrinth."<sup>4</sup> On each landing he placed "elements" covered with photographs he had previously taken from that exact vantage point, creating, in effect, a contrapuntal situation of doubled-back images wherein the sculpture seems to be regarding the viewer. In the uppermost part of the house, in the daughter's playroom, Kamps decided to create a work that did not simply mirror its [dis]placement, but truly interacted with the room. The child's toys, constantly rearranged through daily use, were left in the room to become an integral part of the work, making the room a living installation. For Kamps, this represents the perfect "balance between making art, placing art, and a living situation," and serves as a prototype for the Corcoran project.

<sup>3</sup> Emblem books were collections of symbolic pictures usually accompanied by short texts or verse. These books were popular in Western Europe in the seventeenth century, and The Netherlands was the center of the vogue. For detailed information about emblemata, see *THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF WORLD ART* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1959) vol. 4, 710-734.

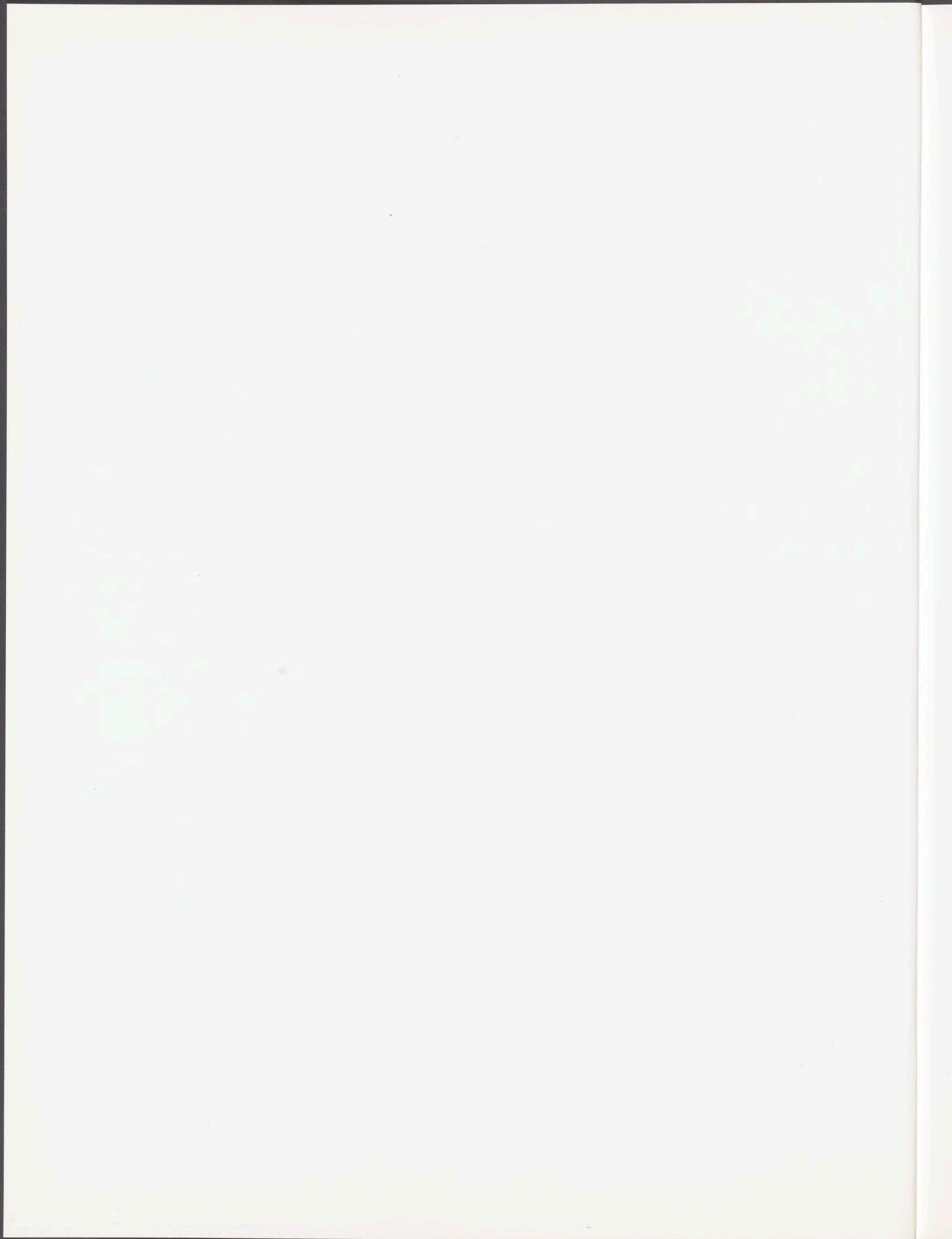
<sup>4</sup> "Chambres d'Amis" (friends' rooms or more generically, guest rooms) was organized by Jan Hoet in Gent, Belgium, 1989. Hoet asked artists to make solo exhibitions in fifty-eight private houses throughout the city, bringing art into the zone of the home. Viewers followed a map from house to house during set visiting hours.



Kemps' exhibition at the Corcoran took shape over a period of a year, as he visited the Gallery, studied the collection, and combed the storage racks. The result is a series of propositions that are posed by the artist and are, in a sense, responded to by the works on display in the museum. By juxtaposing Kemps' work with our historic collection of American paintings and photographs, this project invites us to compare the artist's European-based perspective with the American outlook that is at the core of the Corcoran collection. His installation does not seek definitive answers: his rearrangements of our paintings are not permanent, and although they are iconoclastic, they are not intended to reinterpret art history; nor do his juxtapositions create a narrative between the historical record and the art of today. His intention is not to "intervene" in the permanent collection. Rather, it is to present a highly personal interpretation which, we hope, will pose more questions than it answers and provide an opening for new dialogue by allowing viewers to see through the artist's eyes.









# BEHIND THE FACADE OF ANALYTICAL ORDER

*(A Series of Propositions)*

TERRIE SULTAN, *Curator of Contemporary Art*

Niek Kemps' sculpture posits a conundrum. What at first appear to be solid and substantial structures shift and change as viewers perceive overlapping images and forms from different perspectives. While his natural inclination is to wrest control of the context in which his work is exhibited, Kemps' desire for formal perfection is always accompanied by a poetic, almost painterly conception of how images are made and displayed. This aggressive aesthetic stance results in a precisely choreographed dance that often leaves the viewer grasping fleeting images and partially revealed structures, which, like snatches of overheard conversation, operate on the periphery of consciousness. Kemps seeks to animate and define our perceptions of space by pushing our awareness of architecture to the border between applied and purely visual form. Stressing the dual nature of universal order through concepts such as inside-outside, open-closed, and transparency-reflection, Kemps' hybrid approach weaves light, reflection, and visual symmetry into a densely layered text that is as allusive as it is elusive.

In this exhibition, Kemps uses the Corcoran's building and collection to illustrate the formal, conceptual, and philosophical concerns that are central to his work. The themes and variations we encounter in this dialogue focus on the notion of the circuit as a perceptual framework for understanding time and space; on the mirror and its double as an analogy for the constantly shifting nature of the relationship between perceiver and perceived; and on the social arrangement among artist, art object, and viewer. The terms of Kemps' engagement allow for a measure of freedom within the existing structure of the collection. Rather than presenting



the Corcoran's collection as we generally see it—as a chronological journey through American art that begins with the nineteenth-century landscapes of Alfred Bierstadt, Thomas Cole, and Frederic Church, passes through genre painting, and moves on to postwar and contemporary art—Kemps' arrangement prevents us from traveling sequentially through American aesthetic history. Nor are we provided with a chronological display of the artist's career. Rather, as we progress from gallery to gallery, we see his sculptures contextualized and juxtaposed in such a way as to create a mental continuum that emphasizes Kemps' coming to terms with an artistic terrain that is both strikingly familiar and resolutely foreign to a European point of view.

## THE CIRCUIT

**The garden is an external expression of an interior world.**

*The Architecture of Western Gardens*<sup>1</sup>

**My work is about perception and the possible conditions for change. I am not interested in sculpture or painting as such.**

*Niek Kemps*

Kemps has a passion for gardens, and he has approached his restructuring of the Corcoran galleries almost as if he were a landscape architect. In this case, what Kemps is ordering is the Corcoran's collection of nineteenth- and twentieth-century American art, which readily serves as a representation of a particularly American ethos. By interweaving his works with the natural flora of the collection, he creates a path that is modeled on the classic nineteenth-century garden circuit—

a wandering course, designed for individual contemplation, that led through paced sequences of planned panoramas and sensual close-ups where “time and space seemed to lose their significance.”<sup>2</sup> Kemps' metaphorical “path through the forest” serves as an organizing principle, not in the slash-and-burn approach of frontier America, but in the European tradition of ordering and categorizing.

## PROPOSITION ONE

**My primary concern with this exhibition is that all the art—from the collection, from my collaborations, and my own work—should work together to make a statement about foreground and background.**

*Niek Kemps*



<sup>1</sup> Monique Mosser and Georges Teyssot, eds., *THE ARCHITECTURE OF WESTERN GARDENS: A DESIGN HISTORY FROM THE RENAISSANCE TO THE PRESENT DAY* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991), 11.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.



The first two galleries, usually dedicated to works from the modern and contemporary collection, provide a neutral staging area to introduce the artist's work. **HOUSE FOR SOMETHING CALLED ART** (1995), made in collaboration with Lawrence Weiner, sits center stage, with **PARENTHESIS III** (1991) looming in the background. Very different in tone and scale, these two sculptures address the question of context and the role of the museum in defining aesthetic value and meaning. **HOUSE FOR SOMETHING CALLED ART** is a space that requires a viewer for completion. Weiner's aphorism—standing outside of the heat of the sun—inscribed on the structure, acts as connective allusion to the houses' skinlike polyester material. The body metaphor is continued in the framework, which is lightweight yet strong, and in the human scale of the composition. The structure encourages a kind of metaphysical osmosis, where we physically and intellectually pass through one plane of perception to another. In contrast, **PARENTHESIS III** is cool, geometric, and angular, an enigmatic hybrid of sculpture and architecture. Joined to the wall in a symbiotic relationship, it functions as both a barrier to the succeeding room and a beckoning gesture. By coating the surface with dense pigment, Kamps denies the natural transparency of glass, clouding our ability to fix our gaze. **PARENTHESIS III** is less an indication of interrupted space than it is a ellipsis, a suggestion that in this concise treatment much of significance has been deliberately left unstated.

The structure of **LA FORÊT EST UN ÉTAT D'ÂME** (1985), situated in the next gallery, is based on fragments of concentric circles, systems of distortion and randomness that

imply completeness. It is constructed of wood, curved glass, and lacquer, in a shimmering color that lies on the cusp between the natural and the artificial. Layers of watery images, intensified by the glossy lacquer, simultaneously project depth and immateriality, creating a sense of vertigo. Light is refracted, reflected, yet also sucked into the very core of the object, which, although austere in its geometry, vaguely suggests the natural forms of a sylvan pool.

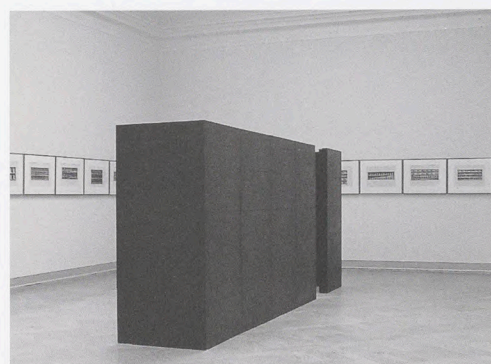
## PROPOSITION TWO

**The mirror promises so much and gives so little, it is a pool of swarming ideas or neoplatonic archetypes and repulsive to the realist.**

*Robert Smithson*<sup>3</sup>

**The mirror is as independent as the viewer; a mirror doesn't reflect an image, a mirror looks.**

*Niek Kamps*



**CLOSED CIRCUITS VI** (1991) and **CLOSED CIRCUITS II** (1990) are placed in conjunction with forty-two collotype prints by the American photographer Eadweard Muybridge.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> THE WRITINGS OF ROBERT SMITHSON, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 50.

<sup>4</sup> A collotype is a photo-lithographic process that produces prints in ink from a photographic image made of gelatin. Developed in 1855, collotypes were used by publishers as a way to produce large editions inexpensively. Sarah Greenough et al., ON THE ART OF FIXING A SHADOW: ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS OF PHOTOGRAPHY (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1989), 502.



This room fully illustrates Kemps' themes, which are then restated in a lyrical orchestration of objects throughout the exhibition circuit. Eschewing the late twentieth-century paintings generally presented in this room and focusing on a singular aspect of the photography collection, Kemps introduces his process of exacting selection and contextualization.

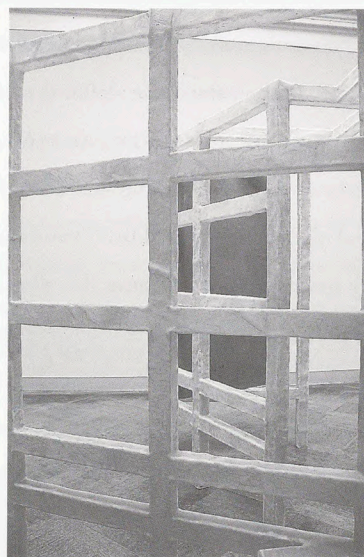
**CLOSED CIRCUITS VI** presents a massive exterior of two rectilinear black shapes, while the complex, unfathomable interior space suggests the stacks of an old, abandoned library, with thousands of small, carved wooden slabs evoking a primordial card catalogue. This chamber is intimate, almost claustrophobic, and is permeated with a sense of melancholy.

**CLOSED CIRCUITS II** is literally impenetrable; standing to one side as a sentinel. Its physical proportions are those of the body, just as the scale of **CLOSED CIRCUITS VI** echoes that of the room. Mounted on the gallery walls is Muybridge's 1887 series **HUMAN AND ANIMAL LOCOMOTION**, drawn from the Corcoran's permanent collection but not normally on display. Kemps' choice to include these images points out the significance of photography in his work, and his fascination with photography in a practical, scientific, but ultimately painterly sense. Like Muybridge, he often combines multiple exposures to suggest the passage of time, but his images are inevitably undermined or even destroyed by double or triple exposures and layering between manipulated glass surfaces. Kemps' sense of time as overlapping and nonsequential is the precise opposite of that captured by Muybridge's photographs, where the conditions of the material world are expressed through a stately progression of precisely defined and isolated human or animal gestures.<sup>5</sup>

### PROPOSITION THREE

**I prefer to use colors that are enigmatic, that resist meaning, and that shift and change with time.**

*Niek Kemps*



Two intimate galleries that usually house temporary exhibitions of works from the photographic, print, and drawing collections follow the Muybridge room. Kemps has emptied these rooms and opened the skylights, bringing in light that is essential to his work, but which would be anathema to the delicate, fleeting nature of works on paper under a museum's care. **HUIS VOOR SCHILDERIJ III** (1995) [House for painting III], a polyester structure housing a work by another collaborator, the Italian artist Ettore Spalletti, occupies the first gallery. Here, Kemps in essence supplies the frame and a seating arrangement from which to view Spalletti's plaster painting, an inventive riff on the ornate nineteenth-century

<sup>5</sup> Produced under the auspices of the University of Pennsylvania and encouraged by the painter Thomas Eakins for their scientific and artistic importance, Muybridge's **HUMAN AND ANIMAL LOCOMOTION** series have become American icons. An abiding preoccupation for Muybridge, the work enjoyed some popularity in his time, but it gained greater significance when twentieth-century artists used his ideas in their pursuit of a more visual sense of abstract movement through time and space. For a full description of Muybridge's life and work, see Anita Ventura Mozley, **MUYBRIDGE'S COMPLETE HUMAN AND ANIMAL LOCOMOTION** (New York: Dover Publications, 1979).

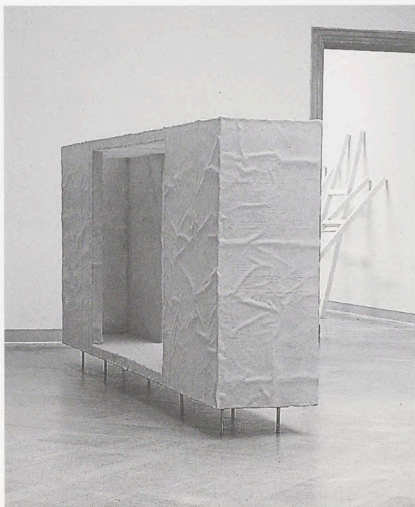


frames that were created for heroic landscape paintings to provide a deep sense of perspective and reinforce the idea of such paintings as windows to nature.<sup>6</sup> In the second gallery, three smaller polyester “houses” from the *INATION: RESERVOIR* series (1995) accompany *ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF INTERNATIONAL* (1987), a tripartite, wall-mounted overlay of paint, glass, photographs, and steel. In contrast to the approachable and immediately discernible nature of *HUIS VOOR SCHILDERIJ III*, the meaning of *ONE HUNDRED YEARS* is obscure. Rather than providing a point of reference, the images behind the scrim of glass and steel are hazy and indecipherable, hinting at human interaction in interior spaces from which we are purposely distanced.

#### PROPOSITION FOUR

**I love personal interpretation, because it's so much stronger than anything else.**

*Niek Kemp*



Kemps' second engagement with work from the permanent collection takes place in the gallery that usually houses mid-twentieth-century paintings and sculpture, including works by Edward Hopper, Maurice Prendergast, and Thomas Hart Benton, and by members of the Ashcan school, Robert Henri and George Bellows. The artists in this room strove to be quintessentially American in their style and subject matter. In addition to changing the wall color from deep rose pink to a warm yellow-brown, Kemps has removed the bronze sculptures, and the paintings he selected are now double-hung, salon-style, along one wall. Standing just to one side of the doorway is *ENTRE DEUX BOÎTES QUI SONT DES MAISONS II* (1992), a polyester-clad “one man museum,” a room-within-the-room whose proportions restate those of the gallery. It becomes clear that the “between” space referred to in the title “Between two boxes that are houses” is a place that is made perceptible only by its boundaries. Farther down the gallery, the large glass panels of *SARABANDES, I-V* (1993) hang on the wall in place of the paintings. While the *SARABANDES* are like paintings—the viewer's interaction is held to a single, frontal perspective—these works define Kemps' rejection of the “realism” espoused by the earlier painters. Kemps' imagery is emphatically late twentieth-century in its overlapping perspective; it is representational only in the strictest sense of the word. Unlike Muybridge's photographs of hands, which are occupied in a narrative series of everyday motions, the hands Kemps depicts are disembodied, their corporeality conveyed only through the poetic suggestion of the flesh-cutting devices they wield.

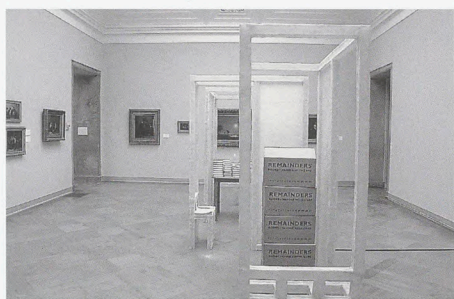
<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the best example of this genre is Frederic Church's *HEART OF THE ANDES* (1859), which toured America and England as a “one-picture, paid-admission special exhibition.” The monumentally scaled painting, which William Corcoran tried but failed to purchase for his museum, was placed in a very large, ornate wood frame that “suggested a window in a grand house.” Bleachers were set up so that visitors could sit and study the painting at their leisure. Franklin Kelly, “A Passion for Landscape: The Paintings of Frederic Edwin Church,” in *FREDERIC EDWIN CHURCH*, exh. cat. (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1989), 57.



## PROPOSITION FIVE

Repetition is contrary to the principle that art reveals the unknown. Together, repetition and revelation form a closed circuit.

*Niek Kemps*



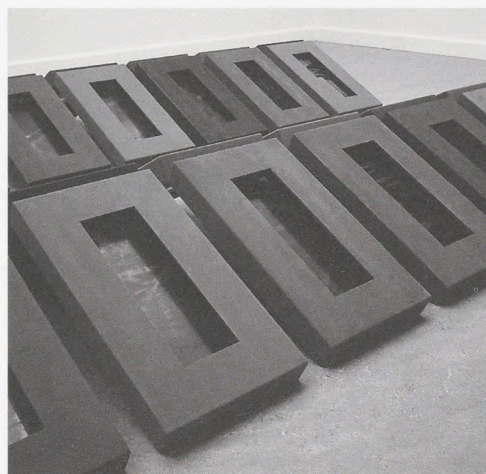
**HOUSE FOR SCULPTURE** (1995), created with Allen Ruppersberg, coexists with a selection of late nineteenth-century *trompe l'oeil* paintings by William Harnett and A. Kline, whose painting **THE TARGET** (1880) Kemps finds intriguing in its peculiar modernity. Also included are genre paintings by Eastman Johnson and Seth Eastman that depict scenes of everyday life in America before the turn of the twentieth century. Kemps has removed the bronze sculpture by Frederick Remington normally seen in the gallery and has reinstalled a selection of paintings along the wall opposite **HOUSE FOR SCULPTURE**. As he has with the works of other contemporary artists, here Kemps develops a new circumscribing arrangement for Ruppersberg's **REMAINDERS** (1991). **REMAINDERS** simulates the remainders table of a retail bookstore, except with the odd twist that Ruppersberg's table is piled high with books that contain not words but a compendium of vintage black-and white-publicity stills.

Ruppersberg's out-of-context film stills parallel the invented realities of the painted genre scenes: they are not captured moments of actual events, but rather representations, simulations of recognizable daily activities that function as a part of an easily grasped, often preexisting narrative. Kemps deconstructs Ruppersberg's work by separating the component parts into three separate polyester structures: one for the books, one for the shipping boxes, and one "as an invitation for a new work." Ruppersberg has responded to the invitation by creating a continuous soundtrack based on the paintings Kemps has allowed to remain in the gallery.

## PROPOSITION SIX

The panoramas of today have become black holes, places where even light cannot escape.

*Niek Kemps*





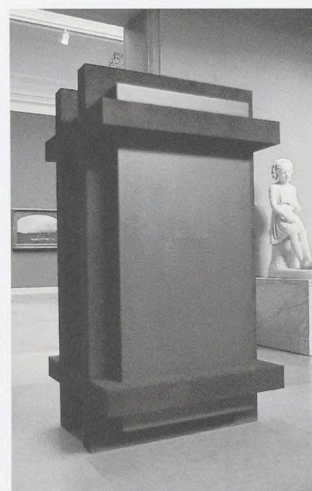
Kemps thinks of the following room, which contains paintings by John Singer Sargent and George Inness, as the garden gallery, and his own work here—*LES PRIVILÈGES DE LA PROMENADE* (1992)—definitely reinforces this conception. The sculpture consists of two long rows of flat boxes covered in green felt and placed opposite each other; leaning together, they suggest a path or, one could imagine, a shady, tree-lined lane into a garden. Inside each box is a picture fragment that affords a glimpse of the Alhambra gardens in Granada, Spain. But these photographs do not present a narrative description of the flora of the garden; instead, they reveal snatches of what Kemps calls “the green architecture” of the garden, the empty spaces between the outdoor rooms and pavilions that support the landscape’s structure. In their nonsequential arrangement, they seem like suddenly recovered flashes of memory or the incomplete sensation of an interrupted dream. Kemps’ view of the gardens is distanced and unreachable, framed by his own architectonic sculpture, just as the actual gardens of the Alhambra are to be seen but not touched:

The enjoyment of nature is thus transformed into a status symbol. Of course this enjoyment of nature is not experienced directly: the foot of the visitor never walks on soil or grass; the flowers are out of reach, unpluckable; to lie down on the grass would be unthinkable. One walks on marble paths, high above the sunken beds, savouring the scent of the flowers and the orange blossom as it wafts upward.<sup>7</sup>

## PROPOSITION SEVEN

I have my doubts about the idea of “less is more.” People use art as a way of solving the complexity of their culture, as a way of simplifying things, whereas complexity allows for different layers to merge.

*Niek Kemps*



At the top of the grand staircase leading to the permanent collection galleries stands *FOLIE À DEUX II* (1984), a compact, mysterious black box that appears capable of containing either treasure or, like Pandora’s box, all the plagues and terrors of the universe. Inscribed on the box is a list of notable eighteenth- and nineteenth-century architectural follies in England.<sup>8</sup> Follies, by definition, presume the enjoyment of a falsehood: scaled to suggest beautiful facades or ruins, with no intrinsic value beyond their aesthetic appeal, they are indulgences, an “emblem of foolish luxury.”<sup>9</sup> Follies, however, are not without significance: strategically positioned within the landscape, they reassure us that the

<sup>7</sup> Marianne Barrucand and Achim Bednorz, *MOORISH ARCHITECTURE IN ANDALUSIA* (Cologne: Benedikt Taschen Verlag, 1992), 208.

<sup>8</sup> Racton Tower, Lordington; Vandalian Tower, Uppark; Ralph Allen’s Sham Castle, Bath; Romulus and Remus on the A39 near West Horrington; Rousham Eye Catcher, Steeple Aston; Lyveden New Bield, Brigstock; Speedwell Castle, Brewood.

<sup>9</sup> Anthony Vidler, “History of the Folly,” in *FOLLIES: ARCHITECTURE FOR THE LATE TWENTIETH-CENTURY LANDSCAPE* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1983), 10.



darker unconscious of human nature (the forest) can be mitigated through the rationality of exotic, romantic facades (the folly), demonstrating man's ability to impose order. Positioned in the entry to a gallery that contains arguably some of the most renowned examples of American landscape painting, such as Church's *NIAGARA* (1857) and Bierstadt's *THE LAST OF THE BUFFALO* (c. 1889), *FOLIE À DEUX II* becomes an allegorical signpost pointing out the distinction between man-made structures and the inventive, equally human devices used to portray nature as a transcendent mystery.

#### PROPOSITION EIGHT

**An "in between state" is a place between parentheses, an area subject to change, a doorway of perpetual movement.**

*Niek Kemp*s



The word *landscape* entered into English in the sixteenth century from the Dutch word *landschap*, which "signified a unit of human occupation, indeed a jurisdiction, as much as anything that might be a pleasing object of depiction."<sup>10</sup> In

the Dutch tradition of reclamation, the ideal landscape was by necessity a place to inhabit and inseparable from human intervention. The American view of landscape, on the other hand, is one of purity and vastness, strengths reflecting our perception of ourselves as a society. The American landscape painting of the nineteenth century, whether portraying the newly explored West or the thoroughly settled Hudson River Valley, captured the essence of a natural vision loaded with mythic connections, memories, and meanings far beyond the limits of veritable depiction. These images became a powerful metaphor for how we saw (and to some extent, still see) ourselves in relationship to the world.

The last gallery on Kemp's circuit is usually the first entered by visitors to the permanent collection. The paintings contained in this gallery, often referred to as "sublime" or "heroic," offer monumental windows to "nature." They are also complexly conceived and composed interpretations of American representational allegory in the landscape tradition. Kemp has not altered the installation of paintings in this gallery, but he has sited two of his own sculptures—*HUIS VOOR SCHILDERIJ II* (1995), created with Austrian painter Herbert Brandl, and *ENTRE DEUX BOÎTES QUI SONT DES MAISONS I* (1992)—as pictorial anchors to the overall tapestry of the room.

Kemp has commented that in the future the word *sublime* "would be applied to a black hole in space."<sup>11</sup> For Kemp, the idea of a space so dense "not even light can escape" is a paradigm for the process of making and seeing art, because it represents a state of absolute mystery—a place where

<sup>10</sup> Simon Schama, *LANDSCAPE AND MEMORY* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 10.

<sup>11</sup> Stuart Morgan, "Playing Blind," in *BIENNALE DI VENEZIA: PAVILIONS FOR BELGIUM AND THE NETHERLANDS*, exh. cat. (Venice, 1993), 12.



everything and nothing can coexist. *ENTRE DEUX BOÎTES QUI SONT DES MAISONS I*, monumentally scaled and distinctly cryptic, is positioned between Samuel F. B. Morse's *OLD HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES* and Thomas Cole's *THE RETURN*, to illustrate Kemps' contention that real appreciation for art can take place only in an atmosphere where disparate representations exist as discrete objects of contemplation linked by an overall historical context. *HUIS VOOR SCHILDERIJ II*, on the other hand, is both more open and more distanced, offering a shelter or safe haven from which to gaze at art.

#### PROPOSITION NINE

**Sculpture is something you bump into when you back up to look at a painting.**

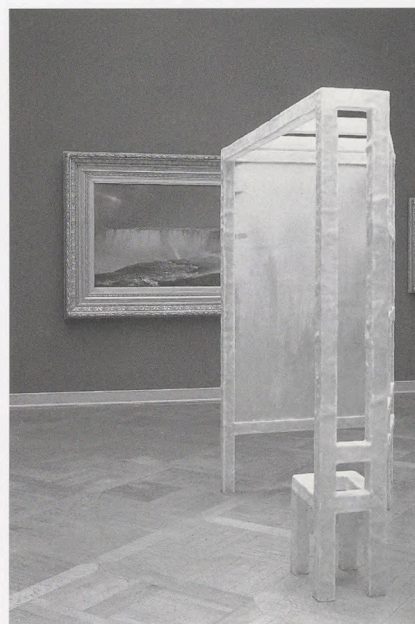
*Ad Reinhardt*<sup>12</sup>

**The whole idea of physical experience doesn't interest me. My sculptures are mental spaces in which different levels of interpretation can be projected.**

*Niek Kemps*

Museums have been alternately viewed as "a stabilizing, regenerative force in modern society...a crusading force for quality and excellence" and as "a place where every separate object kills every other and all of them together the visitor."<sup>13</sup> However defined, the museum as an entity is essentially a paradox: a public place in which we undergo a private experience. The artist, theoretical writer, and polemicist Ad Reinhardt went so far as to say that "any disturbance of a true

museum's soundlessness, timelessness, airlessness, and lifelessness is a disrespect."<sup>14</sup> Kemps is sharply aware of the museum as "a house for art." The museum, his project asserts, is not a mausoleum where dead objects simply occupy space or a curiosity where we can "window shop," gazing at fashionable objects in fictional surroundings that only marginally relate to our everyday lives. Kemps' view is that museums are living places; that the traditional attitudes and modes of presentation can and should be questioned; and that all art, historical or contemporary, only gains in meaning and significance through reexamination and reinterpretation. And from the Corcoran's point of view, what at first seemed disturbing disruptions, as works of art were moved or eliminated from view, ultimately became invigorating, as if the institution could see the familiar made new through a stranger's eyes.

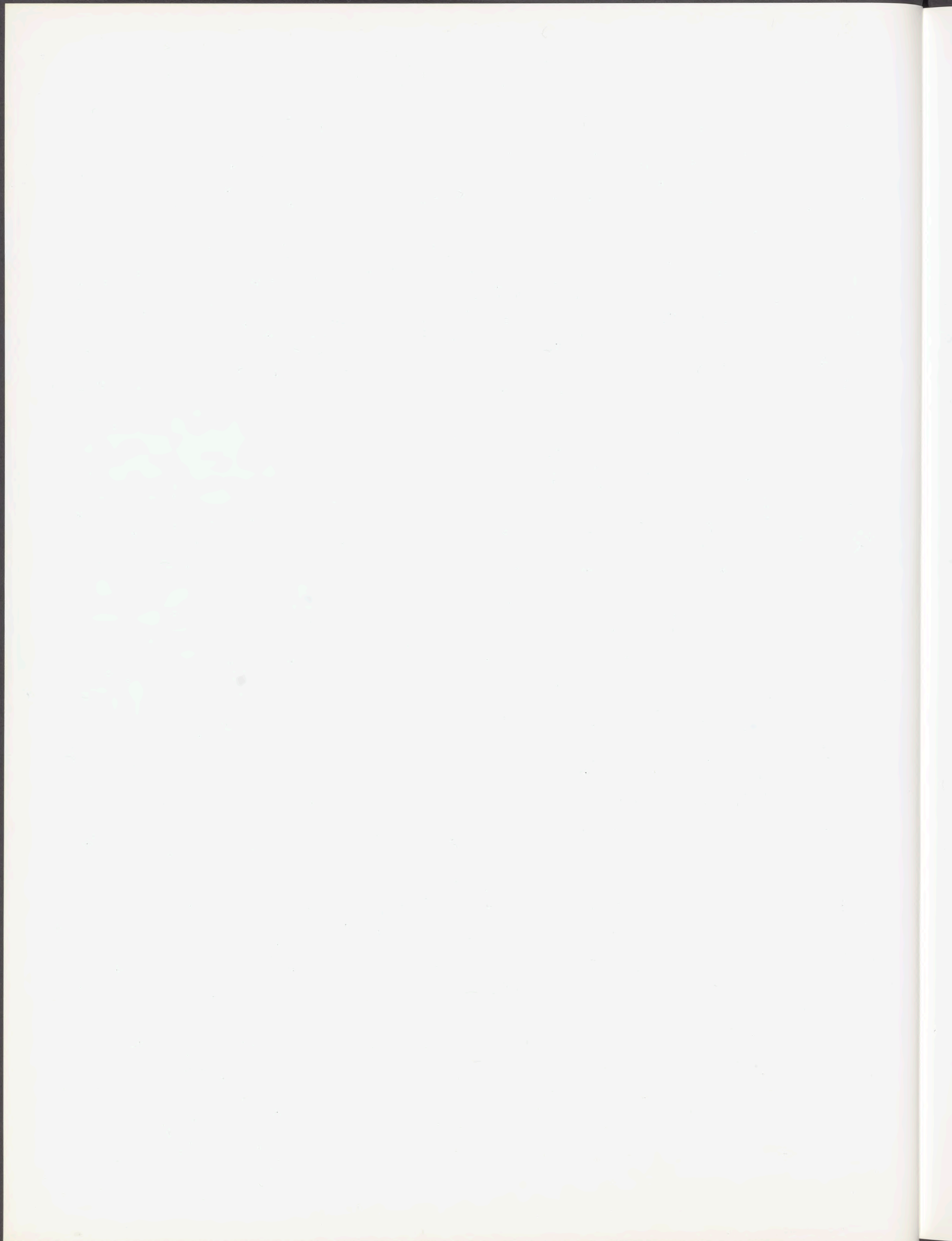


<sup>12</sup> Lucy Lippard, *AD REINHARDT*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1981), 192.

<sup>13</sup> Quotes by Thomas P. V. Hoving and an unidentified German writer cited in Edward P. Alexander, *MUSEUMS IN MOTION: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE HISTORY AND FUNCTIONS OF MUSEUMS* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1979), 5.

<sup>14</sup> *ART-AS-ART: THE SELECTED WRITINGS OF AD REINHARDT*, ed. Barbara Rose (New York: The Viking Press, 1975), 54.





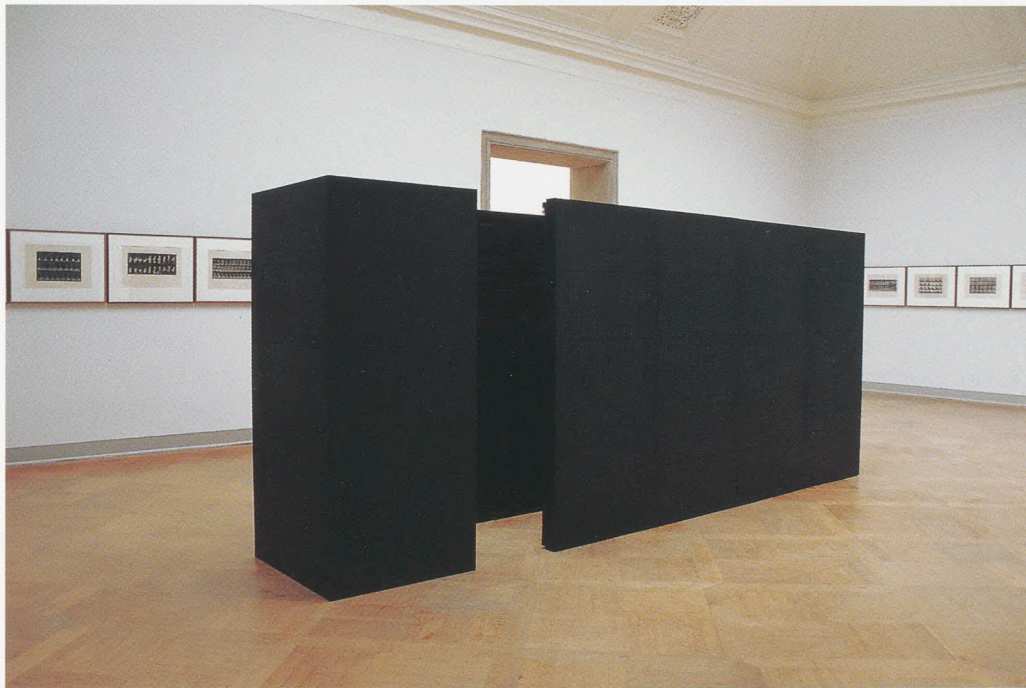




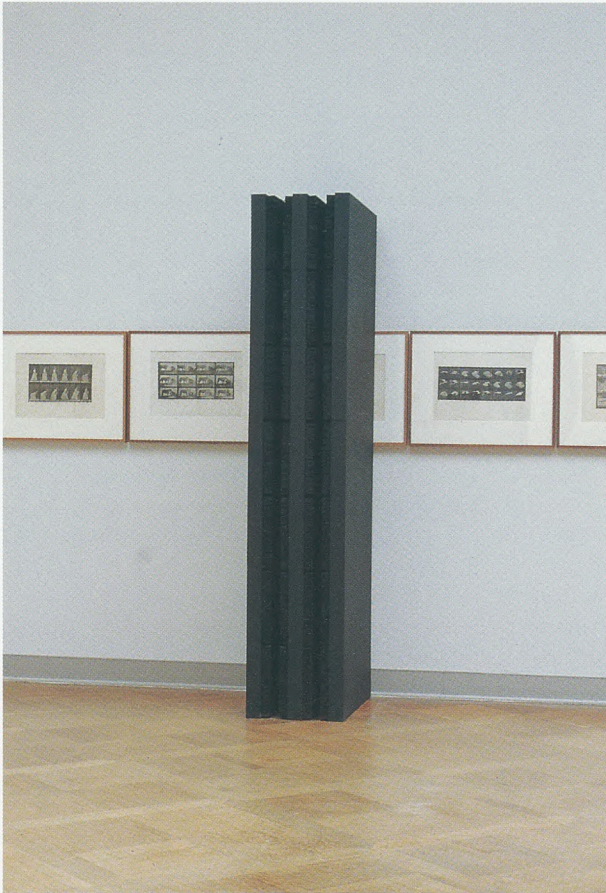








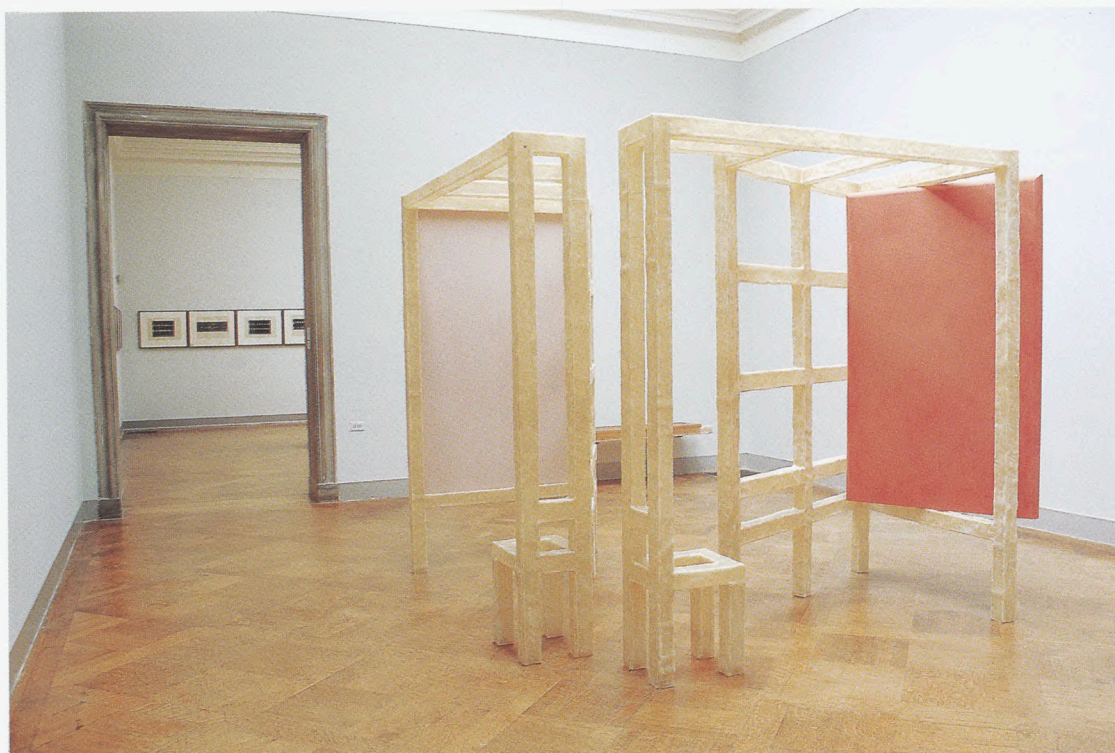




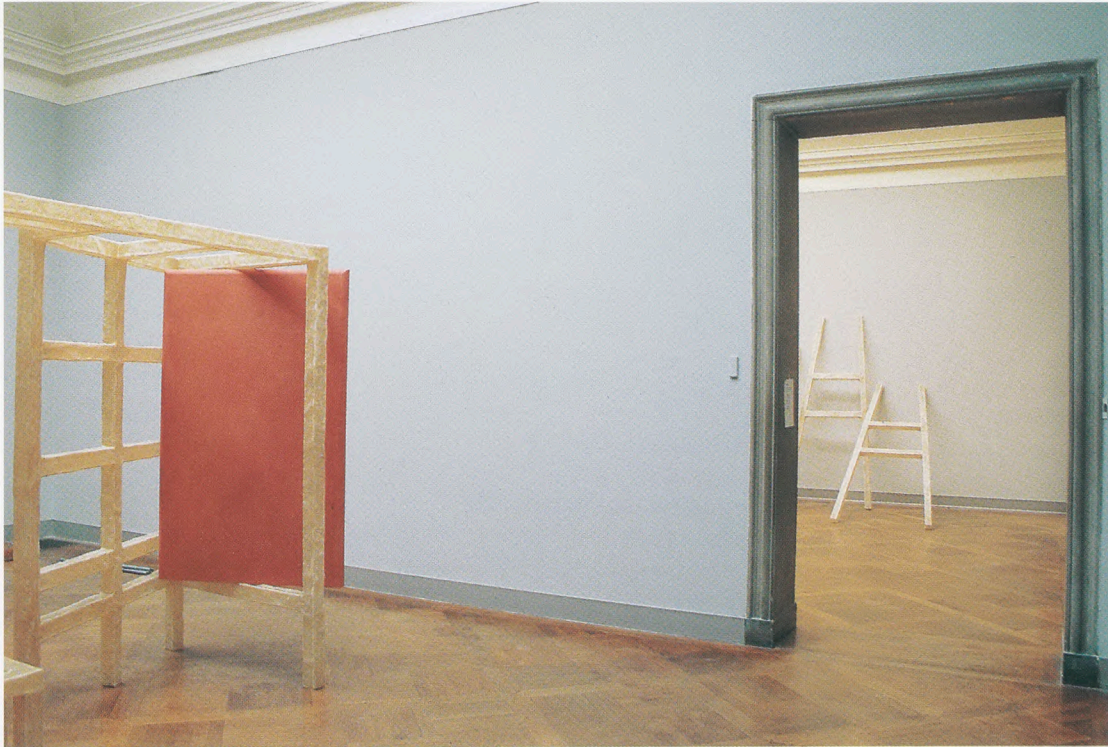








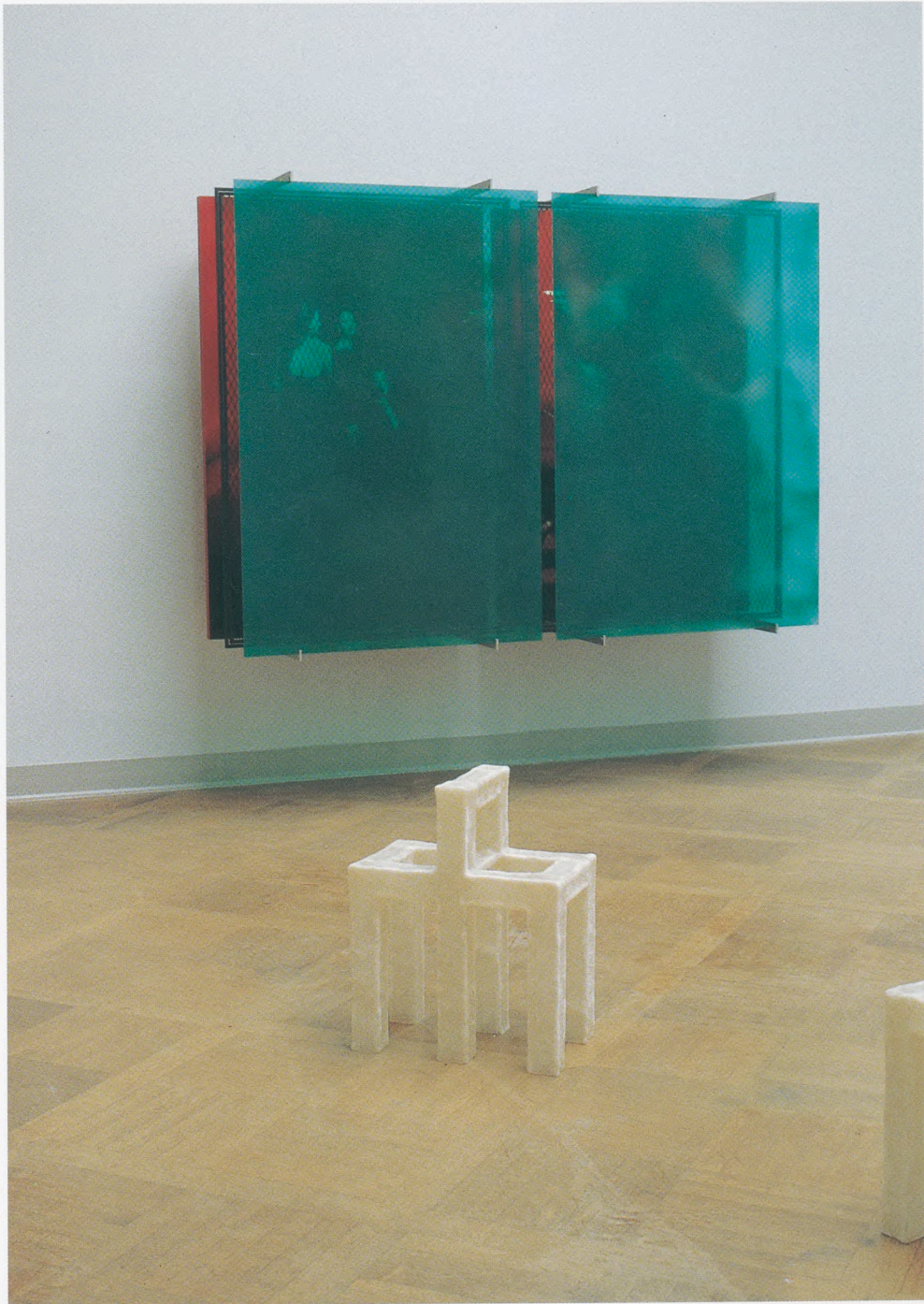


















































# CONCERNING THE BORDERLINE AND THE POETRY OF EMPTY SPACE

ANNELIE POHLEN, *Author*

To speak of the poetry of concepts and action may be confusing. The basis of concepts is rational, of actions physical. But poetry? Does it not describe a buffer-zone, a realm generally given over to the soul, to intuition, to the trans-rational?

In 1988 Nick Kemp took possession of the center of the main gallery at the Bonn Kunstverein with his space-filling two-part sculpture *LA FORÊT EST UN ÉTAT D'ÂME* (1985). To this day I regard it as a crucial work, prompting an examination of the materialized poetry of thought, the mental swing between borderline and center. Poetry, which in matter, form and structure, in the architectural rhythm of 'occupied' space, has pervaded his work with increasing stringency and economy since the mid-eighties. Poetry which by virtue of the casual elegance and beauty of what we see asserts itself as a poetry of the eye and the irritation of perception, as poetry of the space between.

The actual work presents itself as a materialized fiction of a place of encounter and communication: two segments of circles consisting of wooden structures, a cross between autonomous sculpture and designer furniture. Placed on the round, horizontal segments, which in turn rest on open cubes arranged in a circle, are sheets of glass cut to the same shape, standing on their curved edge without any further means of support. Only the handsome green gloss paint, subtly changing in the light, may be said to forge a link with the title which, as the first interpretation suggests, immediately evades one's mental grasp. What the sculpture represents in its



manifest presence conveys the impression of an uncommonly elegant meeting place where nothing has ever happened; the perfect tranquility of a perfect place, undisturbed by any presence or movement.

The undeniable weight, for all its lightness, the material presence of glass and wood and their sculptural structure and placing, epitomize the borderline in Niek Kemp's work, the place where presence and absence interact, translating in a poetic discourse the material form of art, presence, into the philosophical forms of absence. In being present the work suggests what is absent, empty space as the focus of perception, as a force that gives form to absence.

*LA FORÊT EST UN ÉTAT D'ÂME* has become an image of a Socratic academy at the end of the twentieth century, a place of multivalent perception of essence on the borderline of an absent center. The circle and its various adaptations—spirals, ellipses, etcetera—has from time immemorial been a cipher for the desired detected or asserted presence of meaningful entities. Geometry—although refracted in a variety of ways—still stands for people's optimistic hopes of acquiring and disseminating knowledge. In its circularity, St. Peter's Square in Rome expresses certainty as to the triumph of complete Catholic truth. Absolute certainty of meaningful existence dwells here, the spiral symbolizing ascension and salvation. The exchange of intensified energies is the ellipse. Geometrically defined places are oriented towards presence, towards an idea of totality and center.

*LA FORÊT EST UN ÉTAT D'ÂME* is empty; the light falls on the empty space whose architectural, material parts circumscribe something that is not there, the center. In its solemn presence, in its fragile consistency, the empty space reflects the vantage point at the border, outside the barrier which is nonetheless structured for communication, guiding the eye towards the middle with so many clues—glass, open cube supports—not in order to fill the center but to accentuate what is absent at the border. Glass and opening, prospect—vantage position and viewpoint, through and opposite, seeing and perceiving—all focused on the presence of absence or the absence of presence.

#### THE EMPTY CENTER CAUSES CONFUSION.

Confusion is present—today's art epitomizes confusion—not because art is confused but because nowadays there seem to be no grounds for confidence in the presence of the center, which once prevented confusion, or at least seemed to prevent it. The center is empty! What is more, the view through the center refers to those waiting on the borderline: artists, middlemen, physicists, economists, politicians, musicians, philosophers. Confusion stems from the condition of denial, a condition caused by being blindfolded, making the wearer totter in the assumption that being able to see without a blindfold would provide certainty. But where nothing is present, nothing can be perceived—other than the absence of presence.



There is no denying that the center has shifted to those countless border positions which could circumscribe a place without however ever joining to enclose a center again. The border thus remains the vantage point for all, for the community of observers, the borderline, reflected in the glass, the borderline whose presence renders the absence of center transparent.

The forest is a state of the soul, and yet the forest is not a state, nor is it the soul; they are empty spaces, transparent to what lies between, changing in the light without which the forest would not be filled with trees, the light which rouses the soul from the sleep that overcame it when the center was lost. The soul is the victim of the lost center, and with it the forest has sunk into the slumber of the center.

The forest and the soul are the lost children of medieval times, victims of the Age of Enlightenment which destroyed the link between here and there, shifting there into here, the center, entrusting the center to the light of reason. However, the light of reason projected presence into the center, striving to define presence by reason. The fiction of a fixed center has dulled the instruments of reason.

Thus the last philosophers of Enlightenment are today simulating a presence in the center, while all the heretics have withdrawn to the border. From that vantage point they observe the empty center through the curved pane of glass dividing the center from the border without rendering it invisible, through the hollow cubes which force them to duck and then to straighten up; all they see through the pane is what the cubes reveal in sections; the emptiness of the center.

From there, memory clutches at the lost fullness, hazards the states of mind which in their respective regional facets were effective as a global visual or interpretative force in all past cultures. In glass, absence becomes transparent in that it permits perception, even in its unlimited facets, to occupy the center.

The glass divides, protects, borders a space by circumscribing it internally and externally, soul, place, light, the presence of absence, emptiness and perception.

#### GLASS AND TRANSPARENCY

What confuses people today is the assured casualness with which the sculpture uses glass to confront the absence of the center with the presence of the borderline. Confusion is the inevitable consequence of unthinking belief in the center.

In this way the place circumscribing the void becomes a place rendered beautiful by its tranquility, free of all false images/assertions, where perception regains the freedom which the alleged abundance of communication simulates and destroys in everyday reality.

The essence of artistic philosophy is concentrated in linking elements between conceptual structures, poetic images and material codes. In this interaction the 'raw material' of glass dwells in the interfaces of philosophical thought and poetic imagination, of intuitive perception and conceptual dissection. Presence and absence, demarcation and transparency, inside and outside, prospect and reflection, are concentrated in glass; in short, glass absorbs the totality of references to presence and absence which are germane to perception and imagination; in reflection and transparency, glass causes



presence and absence to culminate in a poetic dialogue defined by the structure and material appearance of the sculptural images.

From there, perception again follows the traces left by the presence of absence. The poetic dialogue is immanent in the sculpture, but not present, except in the imagination of the observer on the borderline. Niek Kemps' work is alluring in the material elegance and casual beauty of its form and material, in the rhythm it imposes on the place of its material presence, triggering in its radicality a discourse on the images/ideas infiltrated into the beholder's imagination by what is present—material, form, articulation of the space. Presence/transparency and reflection, concepts from the material world's canon of perception, are converted into poetic codes which from their borderline position render absence transparent as a place from which multiplied imagination can be perceived—as a place of poetic energies beyond the material presence of a simulation of reality submerged by the flood of images. **LA FORÊT EST UN ÉTAT D'ÂME**, reality is a force of poetic perception. Presence is transparent.







### Gallery 14

#### HOUSE FOR SOMETHING

CALLED ART, 1995

*Collaboration with Lawrence Weiner*

Fiberglas and polyester resin,  
rabbit skin glue, text

4 parts;  $86 \frac{5}{8} \times 70 \frac{7}{8} \times 24$  in. each

Courtesy of the artist

#### PARENTHESIS III, 1991

glass, iron, pigment

$39 \times 118 \times 37$  in.

Courtesy of the artist

#### INATION: RESERVOIR VII, 1995

Fiberglas and polyester resin,  
rabbit skin glue

$88 \frac{1}{6} \times 63 \times 47 \frac{1}{4}$  in.

Courtesy of the artist

#### SANS TITRE (LA BELLE PORTE DE VOILE), 1988

glass, wood, photograph

$71 \times 11 \frac{1}{2} \times 12 \frac{1}{4}$  in.

Collection Jef Cornelis

### Gallery 21

#### LA FORÊT EST UN ÉTAT D'ÂME, 1985

wood, curved glass, lacquer

$43 \frac{1}{2} \times 157 \frac{1}{2} \times 236$  in.

Collection A. A. Herbert

### Gallery 22

#### CLOSED CIRCUITS VI, 1991

wood, paint

$72 \times 178 \times 33$  in.

Courtesy of the artist

#### CLOSED CIRCUITS II, 1990

wood, paint

$96 \times 26 \times 30$  in.

Courtesy of the artist

### Gallery 23

#### HUIS VOOR SCHILDERFIJ III, 1995

*Collaboration with Ettore Spalletti*

Fiberglas and polyester resin,  
plaster, wood, pigment

2 parts;

$83 \frac{1}{2} \times 70 \frac{1}{6} \times 45 \frac{1}{6}$  in. each

Courtesy of the artist

#### INATION: RESERVOIR I, 1995

Fiberglas and polyester resin,  
rabbitskin glue

$4 \times 91 \times 15 \frac{1}{4}$  in.

Courtesy of the artist

### Gallery 24

#### ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF INTERNATIONAL, 1987

paint, glass, steel, photograph,  
railings

2 parts;  $69 \times 47 \times 35 \frac{1}{2}$  in. each

Collection Joost Declercq

#### INATION: RESERVOIR II, 1995

Fiberglas and polyester resin

3 parts;

$95 \frac{1}{4} \times 82 \frac{1}{6} \times 2 \frac{3}{4}$  in. each

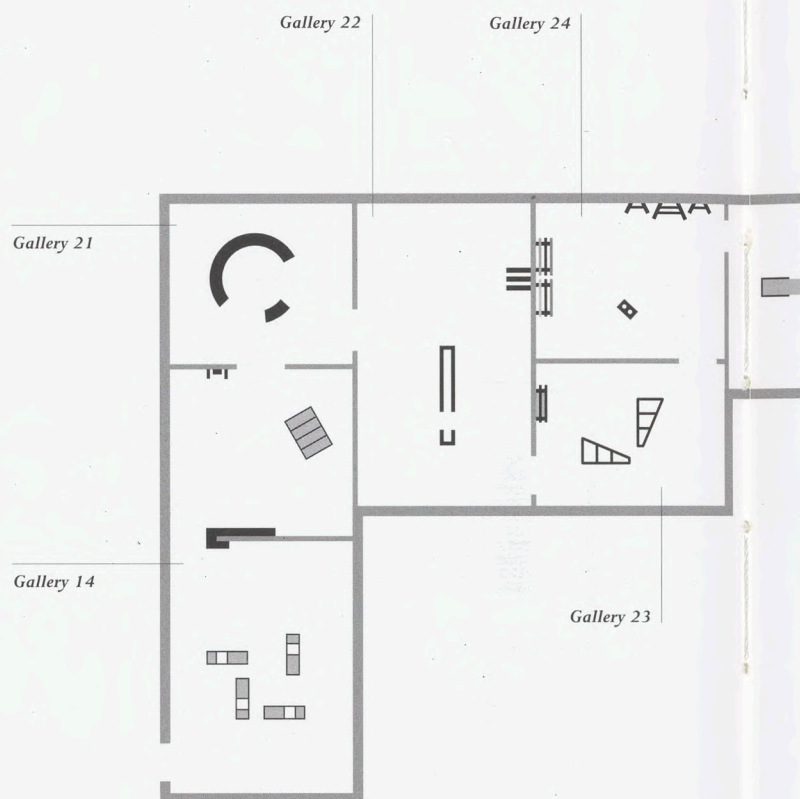
Courtesy of the artist

#### INATION: RESERVOIR III, 1995

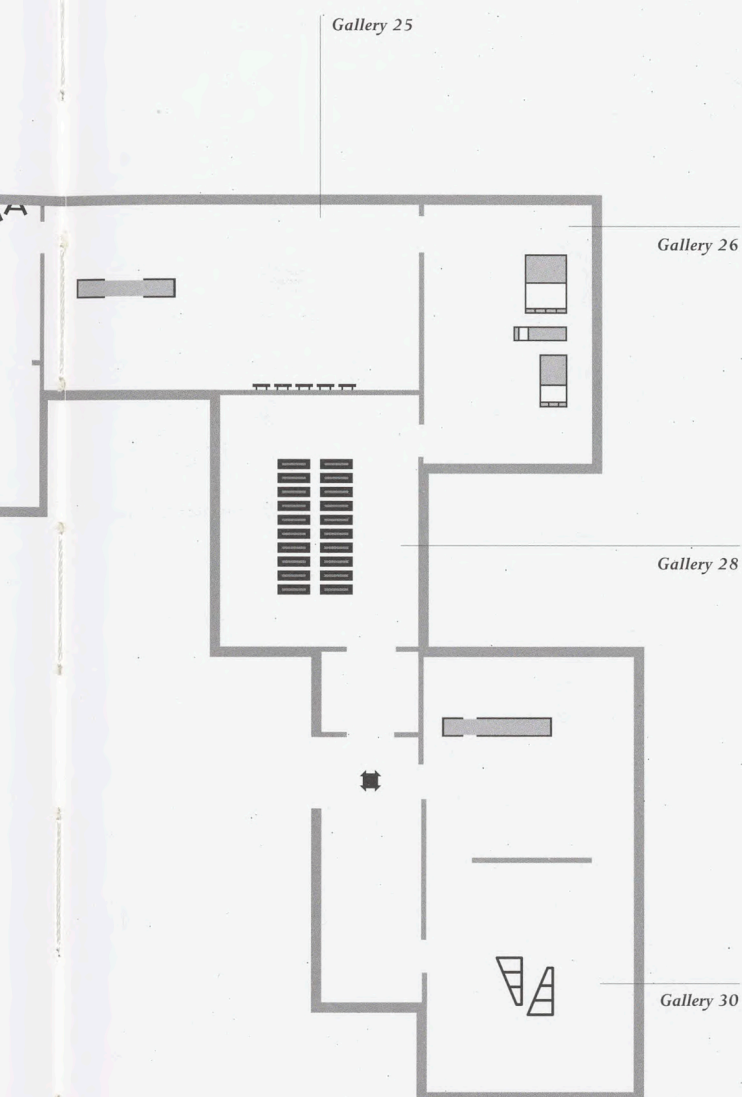
Fiberglas and polyester resin

$25 \frac{9}{16} \times 20 \frac{1}{16} \times 11 \frac{13}{16}$  in.

Courtesy of the artist







### Gallery 25

#### ENTRE DEUX BOÎTES QUI SONT

#### DES MAISONS II, 1992

Fibreglas and polyester resin,  
flocking, iron

69 x 165 x 24 in.

Courtesy of the artist

#### SARABANDES I-V, 1993

glass, photograph, cloth, iron

5 parts, 98 1/2 x 40 x 12 in. each

Collection Stedelijk Museum,  
Amsterdam

### Gallery 26

#### HOUSE FOR SCULPTURE, 1995

Collaboration with Allen Ruppersberg

fibreglas and polyester resin

3 parts;

86 5/8 x 58 1/4 x 68 7/8;

86 5/8 x 58 1/4 x 20 7/8;

86 5/8 x 58 1/4 x 31 7/8 in.

Courtesy of the artist

### Gallery 28

#### LES PRIVILÈGES DE LA

#### PROMENADE, 1992

wood, glass, screenprint,  
flocking

10 parts in 2 rows;

19 1/2 x 151 1/2 x 232 1/2 in. each

Collection Stedelijk Van  
Abbemuseum, Eindhoven

### Landing between Galleries 28 and 30

#### FOLIE À DEUX II, 1984

wood, paint, flocking,  
screenprint

63 x 33 1/2 x 33 1/2 in.

Collection Stedelijk Van  
Abbemuseum, Eindhoven

### Gallery 30

#### ENTRE DEUX BOÎTES QUI

#### SONT DES MAISONS I, 1992

Fibreglas and polyester resin,  
flocking, iron

69 x 165 x 24 in.

Courtesy of the artist

#### HUIS VOOR SCHILDERIJ II, 1995

Collaboration with Herbert Brandl

Fibreglas and polyester resin,  
oil paint

2 parts;

83 7/16 x 70 1/16 x 45 1/16 in. each

Courtesy of the artist

### Atrium

#### BEYOND BORROWED SCENERY, 1995

photosilkscreen on glass  
produced by Dennis O'Neil,  
Associate Professor, and  
students of The Corcoran  
School of Art







## NIEK KEMPS

*Born 1952, Nijmegen, The Netherlands*

*Lives in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, and Wenduine, Belgium*

## SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1979 De gele rijder, Arnhem, The Netherlands
- 1981 De gele rijder, Arnhem, The Netherlands
- 1982 Passionata IBK, Nijmegen, The Netherlands
- 1983 Galerie 'T Venster, Rotterdam, The Netherlands
- 1984 "Hang on to your vertigo," Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, Gent, Belgium
- 1987 Galerie Joost Declercq, Gent, Belgium
- 1988 "Twee Two Deux," Musee d'Art Moderne, Saint-Etienne, France
- "Twee Two Deux," Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam, The Netherlands
- Max Protetch Gallery, New York
- 1990 Galerie Joost Declercq, Gent, Belgium
- 1992 Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands
- Galerie Bruges la Morte, Brugge, Belgium
- 1993 Padiglione di Fandra e Olanda, Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy
- 1994 Galerie Bruges la Morte, Brugge, Belgium
- 1995 "Inedition," l'Aquarium, Galerie d'Ecole, Valenciennes, France
- "Niek Kamps: Recent Sculpture"
- The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1982 "Beelden op de berg," Arboretum Wageningen, Wageningen, The Netherlands
- 1983 "Beelden/Sculpture '83," Rotterdamse Kunststichting, Rotterdam, The Netherlands
- "Une exposition en travaux," A Pierre et Marie, Paris, France
- "Groene Wouden," Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo, The Netherlands
- "Triennale Kleinplastik," Fellbach, Stuttgart, Germany
- 1985 "Seconds Ateliers Internationaux," L'Abbaye Royale de Fontevraud, Fontevraud, France
- "Wat Amsterdam Betreft...," Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- 1986 "The Sixth Biennale of Sydney," Sydney, Australia
- "A Distanced View," The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York
- "Au coeur de Maelstrom, in de maalstroom," Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, Belgium
- "Six Plasticiens Contemporains des Pays-Bas," Musee d'Art Moderne, Villeneuve D'Ascq, France
- "Sculpture da camera," Castello Svevo, Bari, Italy
- "Sonsbeek '86," International Sculpture Show, Arnhem, The Netherlands
- "Chambres d'Amis," Museum voor Hedendaagse Kunst, Gent, Belgium
- "Venice Biennale (Aperto)," Venice, Italy
- "Bazilebustamante-Kemps-Vercruysse," Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva, Switzerland

- 1987 "Documenta 8," Kassel, Germany
- "2 x 2 Aus Holland," Bonner Kunstverein, Bonn, Germany
- "Century '87," Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- "Forum," Middelburg, The Netherlands
- "Nachtvuur," De Appel, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- 1988 "Cultural Geometria," Deste Foundation, House of Cyprus, Athens, Greece
- "The Young Dutch Sculpture," Venice Biennale, Palazzo Sagredo, Venice, Italy
- "Nooit geziene werken," Galerie Joost Declercq, Gent, Belgium
- 1989/90 "Artists prints," Galeria Almada Nequeirios, Lisbon, Portugal; Museo Evora, Evora, Greece; Euro Arte '89, Guimares, Portugal; Stadtmuseum Graz, Graz, Austria; Landesgalerie Schloss Ester-Hazy, Eisenstadt, Germany
- 1990 "Le Spectaculaire," Centre d'Histoire de l'art Contemporain, Rennes, France
- "De verzameling II," Museum voor Hedendaagse Kunst, Antwerp, Belgium
- "Paleistuin/Beeldentuin," Paleis Noordeinde, Den Haag, The Netherlands
- 1991 "Opac," Caixa de Pensions, Barcelona, Spain
- "Nieuwe Aanwinsten/Zomeropstelling," Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands
- "Inscapes," De Appel, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- 1992 "Art for ASAP," Beurs van Berlage, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- "World Expo," Sevilla, Spain
- 1993 "Het sublieme gemis, the sublime void," Koninklijk Museum, Antwerp, Belgium
- "Like a Body Without a Shadow," Marsha Mateyka Gallery, Washington, DC
- 1994 "Art Pays-Bas XXe siecle: Du concept a l'image," ARC, Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville, Paris, France
- "Het Grote Gedicht," Nieuwe Kerk, Den Haag, The Netherlands
- Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, Gent, Belgium
- "Grond," Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam, The Netherlands



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**Editors:** Christopher French, Victoria Larson, Kate Norment

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